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ABSTRACT

A study used an interpersonal goals approach to investigate the impact of normal communicative activity upon the attitude similarity and social attraction relationship of 90 undergraduate students. It was hypothesized (1) that there would be a main effect upon perceptions of social attractiveness and communication competence due to aligning actions--perceived social attraction and communication competence score would be higher in meta-aligning conditions than satisfactory aligning conditions, and higher in satisfactory aligning conditions than non-aligning conditions; (2) that there would be a main effect for conversational identification due to aligning actions; and (3) that there would be a main effect for attitudinal identification due to actual attitude similarity. Subjects' attitudinal and conversational identification were assessed using three scales. Results indicated that perceptions of social attraction and communication competence were moderated independently by attitude similarity and use of aligning actions. Both independent variables produced simple main effects upon social interaction and communication competence, but did not relate uniquely with one another to produce interaction effects. Results suggest that individuals assess their level of attraction and the communication competence of others based both on attitudinal and conversational information--attitudinally similar individuals being perceived as more socially attractive and communication competent than dissimilar persons. (Data tables are included.) (NKA)

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Abstract

The interpersonal goals approach to communication has examined the impact of normal communicative activity upon the attitude similarity and social attraction relationship. However, such research has solely focused upon the contents of messages versus the structuring of the messages within dialogue. A 2 X 3 factorial design was employed to assess the impact of attitude similarity and conversational structure upon perceptions of social attractiveness and communication competence. Conversational structure was defined as the type of aligning strategies employed. Main effects were found for both attitude similarity and conversational structure. Attitudinally similar individuals were perceived as more socially attractive and communication competent than dissimilar persons. Conversational structures which emphasize desirable outcomes and are coherent promote increased perceptions of social attractiveness and communication competence than negatively valenced and incoherent conversations. No interaction effects were found.

The development of strong interpersonal relationships is central to a person's evolving mental health and their socialization into modern society (Sullivan, 1953). Given the importance of interpersonal relationships, several researchers have focused upon the antecedent conditions that promote initial attraction between individuals. An often studied variable in the attraction process has been attitude similarity. In fact, hundreds of studies indicate that attitude similarity is positively associated with interpersonal attraction (e.g. Byrne, 1971).

Early studies regarding attitude similarity and interpersonal attraction employed the "bogus stranger" method developed by Byrne (1971). In fact, two variants of this method commonly have been employed. One approach provides individuals with attitudinal information concerning some non-existent stranger and then asks them to rate their level of attraction towards that person (Clore & Baldridge, 1969; Griffitt, 1969). A variation using this approach has participants divulge their attitudes towards specified topics. However, unlike the first method, participants are then paired into either attitudinally similar or discrepant dyads and asked to briefly discuss their views regarding the specified attitudes (Brink, 1977; Byrne, Erwin, & Lambeth, 1970; Brewer & Brewer, 1968). Both lines of research typically reveal a positive relationship between attitude similarity and interpersonal attraction.

Recently however, Sunnafrank (1983; 1984; 1985; 1986) has criticized these two research approaches on the grounds that they ignore the influence of communication on this relationship and consequently produce ephemeral results. He maintains that the positive relationship between attitude similarity and social attraction only holds in situations where communicative interplay between the participants is not permitted or if the communication focuses

solely on the attitude under discussion. If normal "get-aquainted" conversations transpire after attitude similarity is expressed, this relationship disappears (Sunnafrank, 1983; 1984).

Sunnafrank and Miller's (1981) approach has been termed the interpersonal goals perspective. This approach assumes that individuals seek to attain stable, predictable, and controllable communicative environments. As a result, perceptions of social attraction are primarily based upon the degree to which an individual can achieve these goals in interaction. This program rests heavily upon Berger and Calabrese's (1975) contention that typical get-aquainted conversations consist of an exchange of demographic and nonthreatening personal information and not attitudinal information. A deviation from this pattern would prohibit individuals from achieving their goals, and as a result lead to negative perceptions of social attraction of the other. Adherence to normative communicative patterns, not attitude similarity becomes the primary determinant of social attraction since this produces stable, predictable communication environments (Sunnafrank, 1984, p. 374).

Such an approach accomodates the findings from research which either neglects the communicative process entirely, limits communication to an attitudinal discussion , or allows a typical "get-aquainted" conversation to occur after an expression of attitude similarity. The first two approaches would yield a positive relationship between attitude similarity and social attraction. Since both approaches violate normal communication processes by divulging attitudinal information early in the relationship, they would introduce a high degree of uncertainty within the communicative environment which should lead to lessened perceptions of social attraction (Sunnafrank, 1983; 1984).

The interpersonal goals perspective suggests that normal "get-aquainted" conversations following expressions of attitude similarity weaken this relationship. In a series of experiments (Sunnafrank, 1983; 1984; 1986), equal attraction levels have been observed for attitudinally similar and dissimilar partners following getting acquainted discussions as well as when these conversations are followed by attitudinal discussions. Since normal communicative contact should allow participants to achieve the goals of stability and predictability, attitudinal discussions in the future "should proceed in a manner calculated to maintain stability, predictability, and control leading to high and equal levels of attraction for similar and dissimilar partners" (Sunnafrank, 1984, p. 374).

Research to date from the interpersonal goals perspective has examined either the presence and absence of normal communication upon the attitude similarity/social attraction relationship or the placement of "get-aquainted" conversations preceding attitudinal conversations. As such, this perspective has treated communication as a discrete variable (presence or absence) rather than a continuous variable (types of communication ranging along some continuum). While this approach has directly examined how the content of the conversation (i.e. get-aquainted versus attitudinal discussion) impacts this relationship, it has not examined how the structure within these conversations impacts this relationship. A variety of structural forms of conversation have been proposed including coordinated conversations (Pearce & Branham, 1978), enigmatic episodes (Harre & Secord, 1973), alienating sequences (Riesman, 1959), and positive spirals (Wilmot, 1975). These conversational forms may be arrayed along various structural indices of conversation including the valence of the episode, the degree of membership prompted by the conversation, and the level of coherence within the conversation. It is probable that the form of

conversation may also influence the level of perceived social attraction.

This contention is bolstered by research conducted by Harris, Cronen, and Lesch (1980). In this study, they were concerned with examining the impact of aligning action within conversation upon perceptions of social attraction. According to Stokes and Hewitt (1976) aligning actions are oral messages that link one participant's messages to the other and indicates the relationship of the message to cultural patterns. Harris et al. (1980) used three types of aligning actions within their study. (1) Non-alignment is indicated by the failure of the participants to adjust their messages to one another. For example, consider the following piece of dialogue:

Lee: Are you from around here?

Chris: I'm from Illinois.

Lee: I'm a native Texan. I've lived in Waco all
all my life.

In the non-alignment condition, "connecting words and phrases that explicitly locate each message among other are removed" (Harris et al., 1980, p. 11).

(2) Satisfactory alignment explicitly locates a message in the flow of conversation. It may acknowledge the preceding message or indicate what subsequent messages are to follow. The following dialogue has aligning action underlined:

Lee: Are your from around here?

Chris: No, I'm from Illinois, are you?

Lee: Yes, I'm a native Texan. You're pretty far
from home. I've lived in Austin all my life.

(3) Meta-alignment entails not only aligning the actions within the conversation, but simultaneously creating a meta-communication episode. For example, social actors may create role distance from a normative cultural

pattern by commenting upon their own performance and on the pattern itself (Goffman, 1959). For example:

Lee: Hi! My name is Lee. What's yours?

Chris: Hi Lee. My name is Chris. I think your next question is supposed to be "Are you from around here?"

Lee: Are you from around here? or something like that (Laugh).

Chris: Oh, what an "interesting" question....

In this episode, the underlined phrases are meta-aligning actions that serve to distance the conversational participants from the typical greeting ritual.

The results from the Harris et al. (1980) study indicate a strong effect upon social attraction due to conversational form. They found that subjects viewed individuals participating in either a satisfactory or meta-alignment condition as more socially attractive than those participating in a non-alignment condition. Furthermore, a similar set of findings emerged for perceptions of the communication competence of the other person. These results suggest that the form of conversation, in addition to its mere presence or absence, may strongly influence individual's perceptions of social attractiveness and communication competence.

The focus of this research project is to examine the interaction of conversational form with expressed attitude similarity. Sunnafrank (1983) contends that conversation can eliminate the attitude similarity/social attraction relationship. Unless preconversation information is supplemented by actual dialogue, a positive attitude similarity/social attraction relationship will emerge. Furthermore, Harris et al.'s (1980) research demonstrates variations in conversational form, as operationalized by aligning

actions, impact perceptions of social attraction. Subjects reading hypothetical transcripts of dialogues reflecting different types of alignment strategies perceived their attraction level towards others differently. These two groups of studies offer two important research questions: (1) Does preconversational information regarding how individuals structure their talk overcome preconversational information concerning an individual's attitudes?, and (2) Do variations in actual conversational performance of an individual enhance or diminish the influence of preconversational attitudinal information? The focus of this exploratory study is on the former question.

Derived Research Hypotheses

Research by Sunnafrank (1983; 1985; 1986) suggests that the relationship between attitude similarity and social attraction diminishes once individuals have the opportunity to converse. However, Sunnafrank has neglected the possibility that preconversation information on how individuals talk may influence perceptions of social attractiveness. When individuals make decisions on whether or not to begin a social relationship, they may identify with an individual not only on the basis of attitudinal predispositions but on other types of identifications. For example, Laird and Hemphill (1983) propose that the degree to which an individual identifies with the actions performed by another may influence their perceptions of that individual's competence. The degree to which an individual shares a similar image of acting together may facilitate higher levels of social attraction. Therefore, attitudinal similarity may be one predictor of attractiveness. Another predictor may be the degree to which a target person's conversational performance corresponds with the individual's definition of appropriate action.

Participating in get-aquainted conversations diminishes the attitude

similarity/social attraction relationship because predictability is enhanced due to increased knowledge. A secondary source of knowledge is the observation of the communication pattern of a third party by the subject (Berger et al., 1976). Therefore, one would not anticipate social attraction to exhibit an effect due to attitude similarity in preconversation if the knowledge regarding an individual's typical communicative pattern is presented. This assumes that transcripts of dialogue present similar types of information as do actual conversations. Therefore, the form of the conversation and the degree to which the subject identifies with the form should influence perceived levels of social attractiveness and communication competence. This leads to the following hypotheses:

- H₁ There will be a main effect upon perceptions of social attractiveness and communication competence due to aligning actions. Perceived social attraction and communication competence scores will be higher in meta-aligning conditions than satisfactory aligning conditions, and higher in satisfactory aligning conditions than non-aligning conditions.
- H₂ There will be a main effect for conversational identification due to aligning actions.
- H₃ There will be a main effect for attitudinal identification due to actual attitude similarity.

Method

A 2 X 3 factorial independent groups design was employed in this study. Levels of attitude similarity (agreement or disagreement) and aligning action (non-aligning, satisfactory, or meta-aligning) were manipulated as independent variables. Dependent measures included: (1) McCroskey and McCain's (1974) and Byrne's (1971) conceptualizations of social attraction, (2) communication competence measures, (3) attitudinal identification, and (4) conversational identification.

Subjects

Subjects were volunteers from the basic communication course of a large private southwestern university. A total of 90 subjects were randomly assigned to the six conditions. The mean age of the subjects was 21.98 years with 35 males and 55 females.

Procedures

All experimental sessions were held in standard classrooms. At the beginning of each session, subjects were informed that they would be participating in a study that examined their ability to make predictions about another individual named Chris based on limited information. They were informed that they would be meeting Chris later during that session. Furthermore, Chris would also be asked to adapt a speech given before the group based on limited information provided by the group. Before meeting Chris, they were asked to divulge some information so that Chris would be better able to make predictions about the subjects and adapt the "speech" accordingly.

Subjects were questioned over four attitudinal areas: (1) capital punishment, (2) nuclear energy, (3) gun control, and (4) mandatory prayer in public schools. The first two topic areas were used in order to be consistent with Sunnafrank's research. For each topic subjects completed a dichotomous measure (yes or no) on their attitudes towards the topics. Their responses were collected and tabulated.

Subjects then received a packet of materials that contained information about Chris and a set of dependent measures. The first type of information they received were Chris' responses to the same attitude questions they completed. Only the information regarding capital punishment and nuclear energy was relayed to the subjects. Attitude similarity condition was operationalized as having Chris' responses to the two questions being

identical with the subject. Attitude dissimilarity was operationalized as having complete disagreement on the two topics with the subject.

Subjects then read one of three transcripts of dialogues that occurred between Chris and another person Lee.. Sex neutral names (Chris and Lee) were utilized to minimize bias due to sex. Each dialogue maintained the same topic sequence for self disclosure. Two statements from categories one to five of Berger et al.'s (1975) study were utilized to construct the conversations. The conversations consisted of eleven messages between the two individuals. The conversations began with information from Category 1 and ended with information from Category 5. Three forms of conversations were utilized: (1) non-aligning, (2) satisfactory aligning, and (3) meta-aligning. These were operationalized as described earlier in the essay.

After familiarizing themselves with the preconversational attitudinal and conversational information, the subjects then completed a set of scales measuring the following: (1) the perceived communication competence of Chris, (2) Byrne's and McCroskey and McCain's interpersonal attraction scales, (3) attitudinal identifications, and (4) conversational identifications. Social attractiveness was operationalized using McCroskey and McCain's (1974) scales of social attraction and Byrne's (1971) interpersonal attraction scales. Reliabilities for these measurements using Cronbach's alpha for this study were .70 and .70 respectively. Communication competence of the target person (Chris) was measured using the following two Likert-like items: (1) I feel Chris would have great difficulty communicating with people in a similar situation., and (2) I think that Chris knows very well how to communicate in this kind of situation. Internal reliabilities for this measure using Cronbach's alpha were .81. Harris (1979) also suggests that communication competence is related to the degree that the conversation is desirable and

coherent. Single Likert-like items operationalized these two variables: (1) The conversation between Chris and Lee was very easy to follow., and (2) This conversation was very desirable. Barge (1985) reports reliabilities for these two items using Cronbach's alpha as .88 and .97 respectively.

Attitudinal and conversational identification were each operationalized using three scales. The scales for attitudinal identification included: (1) Chris has attitudes and beliefs similar to my own., (2) Chris' attitudes are very similar to the attitudes of my friends., and (3) I can identify with Chris' attitudes very much. Conversational identification was operationalized using the following scales: (1) This kind of conversation makes me feel like Chris and I are very similar., (2) I can identify with the way Chris talks to Lee in this conversation., and (3) The way Chris talks to Lee is very similar to the way I talk with my friends. Reliabilities for both sets of items using a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients were .81.

After subjects completed the scales they were thanked for their participation and debriefed.

Results

The scales comprising each dependent variable were summed together. A 2 X 3 analysis of variance was computed for each dependent measure. When required, a Student Newman-Keuls' procedure was used to assess difference among means. An alpha of .05 was employed. Mean scores for all variables are reported in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Perceived Communication Competence

The analysis for communication competence revealed main effects for actual attitude similarity and aligning actions. Subjects in attitude similarity conditions (S) perceived the target person as more communicatively competent than in the attitude dissimilarity (D) condition ($F(1/84)=4.37$, $p=0.04$, $\underline{MS}=9.31$, $\underline{MD}=8.24$). A conversational main effect was also discovered ($F(2/84)=17.12$, $p=0.00$, $\underline{MN}=6.67$, $\underline{MS}=9.87$, $\underline{MM}=9.80$). Using the Student Newman-Keuls' procedure, it was found that perceptions of Chris' communicative competence were significantly lower in the no-aligning condition than either the satisfactory or meta-aligning condition. Chris' communicative competence was perceived as being highly similar in both the satisfactory and meta-aligning condition.

Both specific measures of communication competence, episode valence and coherence, exhibited main effects due to aligning actions. The no-aligning condition was less desirable than either the satisfactory or meta-aligning conditions ($F(2/84)=10.81$, $p=0.00$, $\underline{MN}=2.57$, $\underline{MS}=4.00$, $\underline{MM}=4.43$). A Student Newman-Keuls' procedure indicated subjects perceived the satisfactory and meta-aligning conditions as similar in desirability. Identical results occurred for the level of conversational coherence ($F(2/84)=25.01$, $p=0.00$, $\underline{MN}=2.70$, $\underline{MS}=5.37$, $\underline{MM}=5.17$).

Interpersonal Attraction

Only main effects were found for levels of interpersonal attraction as measured by Byrne's and McCroskey and McCain's scales. Using Byrne's interpersonal attraction scales, subjects in the attitude similarity condition perceived Chris as being more socially attractive than those in the attitude dissimilarity condition ($F(1/84)=8.15$, $p=0.01$, $\underline{MS}=10.42$, $\underline{MD}=9.27$). Main effects for conversation revealed that subjects in the no-aligning condition

perceived Chris as being less socially attractive than the satisfactory aligning condition ($F(2/84)=3.19$, $p=0.05$, $MN=9.17$, $MS=10.40$, $MM=9.97$). The meta-aligning condition was similar to both the no-aligning and satisfactory aligning conditions. Identical simple effects emerged for the McCroskey scales for both attitude similarity ($F(1/84)=5.52$, $p=0.02$, $MS=20.91$, $MD=19.02$) and aligning actions ($F(2/84)=3.14$, $p=0.05$, $MN=18.77$, $MS=21.23$, $MM=19.90$).

Identifications and Attraction

The analyses on the two types of identification revealed simple main effects but no interaction effects. For attitude identification, a simple main effect emerged due to actual attitude similarity ($F(1/84)=20.12$, $p=0.00$). Subjects in the attitude similarity condition identified with Chris' attitudes ($MS=13.07$) more highly than in the attitude dissimilarity condition ($MD=9.93$). Furthermore, attitude identification was moderately correlated to perceptions of interpersonal attraction ($r(90)=.61$, $p=0.05$).

A main effect due to aligning action emerged for conversational identification ($F(2/84)=11.06$, $p=0.00$). Subsequent analyses revealed that the subjects in the no-aligning conditions ($MN=7.03$) identified less with the conversation than those in either the satisfactory ($MS=11.30$) or meta-aligning conditions ($MM=9.37$). Subjects also identified more with the conversational pattern being performed during the satisfactory conditions versus meta-aligning conditions. Conversational identification was also moderately correlated with perceived interpersonal attraction ($r(90)=.51$, $p=0.00$).

Discussion

Results from this study indicate that perceptions of social attraction and communication competence are moderated independently by attitude similarity and use of aligning actions. Both independent variables produced simple main effects upon social attraction and communication competence but

did not relate uniquely with one another to produce interaction effects.

Consistent with Sunnafrank's (1983; 1984; 1986) research, preconversation attitudinal information produced main effects upon perceptions of social attraction. Not only did subjects perceive attitudinally similar target persons as more social attraction, they also perceived them as more communicatively competent as well. This seems somewhat surprising as most definitions of communication competence rest upon how people perform during conversation rather than pre-existing dispositions (Cushman & Craig, 1976; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). However, some conceptualizations of communication competence emphasize that empathy and social confirmation are partial determinants of one's overall level of communication competence (Berryman-Fink & Pederson, 1981). Subjects who perceived others as possessing similar attitudes may infer that they have a high degree of empathy with one another. In turn, this perception of empathy may contribute to their perception of the other individual as being communicatively competent. Therefore, perceptions of communication competence were not based solely upon the conversational performance by the target individual, but also based on inferences drawn concerning their level of attitudinal similarity.

The structural aspects of conversation also produced main effects upon perceptions of social attraction and communication competence. Main effects due to the use of aligning actions were uncovered. Consistent with Harris et al.'s (1980) research, subjects perceived the target person in the no-aligning condition as less communicatively competent and socially attractive than the target person in either the satisfactory aligning or meta-aligning condition. This finding points to the influence that the perceived coherence and valence of the conversation has upon perceptions of social attractiveness. No-aligning conversations were perceived as less desirable and coherent than the

remaining two conditions. More coherent and desirable conversations increase the likelihood that an individual will perceive another person as communicatively competent and socially attractive. This is partially confirmed by Broome's (1983) work where he found that subjects who read a fictitious transcript portraying a target individual were more attracted to the target person when s/he was positively evaluating the topic under discussion versus using negative evaluation.

Preconversation knowledge of the communicative capabilities of the target individual did not overcome differences due to attitude similarity. This suggests that preconversational knowledge of the dispositional characteristics of one's communicative ability is less in information than informational cues ascertained in actual interaction. Using a research method such as Sunnafrank's (1983; 1984; 1986) where subjects actually interact with one another versus written transcripts, may provide a host of other information cues based on the nonverbal attributes of the subject and allow subjects to guide the conversation to areas that they wish to know more about the target person. As such, the information richness of naturally occurring conversation may be more important in moderating the relationship between social attractiveness and attitude similarity than preconversation information regarding how individuals structure their communication.

However, perceived coherency of preconversation information regarding conversational information does seem to moderate the attitude similarity and social attractiveness relationship. Within the no-aligning condition, subjects under either the attitude similarity or dissimilarity condition perceived the target person as equally unattractive ($t(28)=0.73$, $p=0.15$, $MS=9.40$, $MD=8.93$) and communicatively competent ($t(28)=0.15$, $p=0.88$, $MS=6.73$, $MD=6.60$). In both conditions, subjects perceived the conversation as

equally undesirable ($t(28)=-1.48$, $p=0.14$, $MS=2.20$, $MD=2.93$) and incoherent ($t(28)=-0.72$, $MS=2.53$, $MD=2.87$). Given that the no-aligning condition is less desirable and coherent than either the satisfactory or meta-aligning conditions, it seems plausible that extreme incompetence can overshadow information regarding attitude similarity. However, when the information regarding the conversation portrays the individual as communicatively competent, both the information concerning the attitudes and conversation are assessed separately.

This exploratory research has demonstrated that individuals assess their level of attraction and communication competence of others based both on attitudinal and conversational information. While preconversation information regarding conversational structure does not diminish the attitude-similarity and social attraction relationship, it is possible that variations of actual conversational structure can influence the relationship. While some research in field settings shows that different conversational forms impact perceptions of communication competence (Barge, Johnson, & Downs, 1985), additional research needs to be aimed at exploring how differences in actual conversational structure as performed by individuals impacts perceptions of social attractiveness.

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Table 1
Mean Scores for Dependent Measures¹

	Attitude Similarity	Attitude Dissimilarity
No-aligning Condition	1. 6.73 2. 2.20 3. 2.53 4. 18.60 5. 9.40 6. 11.53 7. 6.53	1. 6.60 2. 2.93 3. 2.87 4. 18.93 5. 8.93 6. 9.40 7. 7.53
Satisfactory Aligning Condition	1. 10.40 2. 4.13 3. 5.47 4. 22.80 5. 11.00 6. 13.93 7. 11.93	1. 9.33 2. 3.87 3. 5.27 4. 19.67 5. 9.80 6. 10.20 7. 10.67
Meta- aligning Condition	1. 10.80 2. 5.00 3. 5.20 4. 21.33 5. 10.87 6. 13.73 7. 10.53	1. 8.80 2. 3.87 3. 5.13 4. 18.47 5. 9.07 6. 10.20 7. 8.20

Where: 1=Mean Score for Global Communication Competence
 2=Mean Score for Episode Valence
 3=Mean Score for Coherence
 4=Mean Score for McCroskey and McCain Social Attraction
 5=Mean Score for Byrne's Interpersonal Attraction
 6=Mean Score for Attitudinal Identification
 7=Mean Score for Conversational Identification